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ABSTRACT

A reading instructor interested in reliving the experience of learning to read for the first time attempted to read "Androcles and the Lion" in Shavian Alphabet. The would-be reader of Shavian faces a page of hooks and slants completely unfamiliar, but there is no translation problem. As soon as the reader can pronounce out loud the sounds represented by these hooks, he hears himself reading English. In several aspects, this experience parallels that of the first-grader learning to read: (1) it involves an unknown code, the Shavian alphabet; (2) once the correct sound for the symbol is made, it is like reading in an individual's mother tongue; (3) it is hard work; and (4) Shavian presents a lot of trouble with reversals such as "b" and "d." Learning to read in Shavian suggests how much easier it might be to learn to read in English if the alphabet more accurately reflected the sounds in the language. By 1961, British schools were trying out a new alphabet developed by Sir James Pitman called the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i/t/a/), which uses the Roman alphabet along with some additional letters. Intended as a beginner's start-up and no more, i/t/a helps students confront the text, to read phonetically instead of guessing. When the time is right the switch from i/t/a to standard Roman is accomplished through transition books, though some children switch from one to the other almost without realizing it. Perhaps it is time to take another look at i/t/a to help children through their initial trials of learning to read. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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How Does It Feel to Begin to Learn to Read?

Dimly I remember studying a page of my mother's handwriting, admiring the neat lines, aware that she could make meaning of it. I remember filling pages myself with rows of humps and scribbles, pretend writing. But of the actual process whereby I learned how to read, I remember almost nothing.

One day my grownup son brought me a copy of Shaw's Androcles and the Lion printed in Shavian alphabet. "Here," he said, "try this. For years you have taught beginners how to read. Now see how it feels to be the beginner."

Facing a page of Shavian script is not like confronting a page of French or Latin, from which familiar letters look out at us. It is not even like trying to read Greek; for once the Greek letters are transliterated into Roman alphabet, it's still Greek. The would-be reader of Shavian faces a page of hooks and slants completely unfamiliar, but there is no translation problem. As soon as the reader can pronounce out loud the sounds represented by these hooks, he hears himself reading English. It is the same for a first-grader learning to read his native language.

It took me six weeks to read Androcles. I worked in odd moments, ten or fifteen minutes at a time, never more than half an hour, on scattered days. I began by using the key-card and writing, first a few words, then sentences in Shavian. I exchanged a few written messages in Shavian with my son, who got an early head-start on me. Then I began to read the play. I was faithful about keeping strictly covered each facing page of standard print until I had figured out the Shavian page myself. When a passage seemed odd, I referred to the solution only after I had deciphered the Shavian. Sometimes I had made a mistake; sometimes I was being kidded by Mr. Shaw. Yet, although I did not use it, there was support for my courage in knowing that the transliteration was at hand if needed.

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At first I kept the key-card right beside the page as I read, or rather deciphered; for this was a job in decoding, and the code was on the card. It was letter-by-letter work. I used no pencil at this stage, but I did read aloud or whispering. It was slow work. The fact that Androcles is entertaining helped. In time I was able to lay aside the key-card. The speed at which I read increased geometrically. The first paragraph was very, very slow. It took me several days to get past the first page. I would try, then give up, then try again another time. The second page was better, but very slow. A quarter of the way through, I could read two or three pages at a sitting. The last half went fast enough to be called fun. By that time I was enjoying Mr. Shaw's play.

How does it feel to begin to learn to read? This experience with Androcles and the Lion in Shavian alphabet parallels the experience of a first grader in several aspects:

1. I faced an unknown code, the Shavian alphabet.
2. Once I made the correct sound for each symbol, I was reading aloud in my mother tongue.
3. It was hard work. I had to try.
4. I had a LOT of trouble with reversals. The Shavian includes elements related in shape just as b, d, p, and q are shape-related, or n and u.
5. At the beginning I tired easily; after I became familiar with the symbols-for-sounds and could give up the key-card, it went faster.

There are some differences too:

1. Reading from left-to-right was an old habit for me.
2. My book contained no pictures.
3. The play was highly entertaining, not in the least simplified for a beginning level nor contrived for teaching by repetitions.

What good did all this do me as a reading teacher? Well, the best benefit was the feeling of sympathy and understanding it gave me for the youngster studying his book. My patience seems to hold more freely and spontaneously. I have less need to command myself to be patient. I think teachers of children will recognize my distinction between dutiful and voluntary patience.

Beyond patience, I did observe some other elements that might be pondered by a reading teacher:

1. I learned to write Shavian code first. Writing must always have come before reading in mankind's story, else there could be nothing to read. Writing also compelled me to pay attention to small differences between symbols.

2. Sharing the experience with another beginner was no help. A sort of competition sprang up between me and my son. When he seemed to be learning it faster, I got discouraged and found the work dull. We stopped comparing notes. Then the reading itself became interesting, without the distraction of running a race.

3. I lost my place in a page of Shavian with appalling frequency. I could not find it again except by starting over again some lines back. It helped me to use a card to hold the line.

4. It was not until I was halfway through the book that I began to read any words as whole words, and these were not the names of the characters at first; it was some of the short words that became familiar at sight: by, on, is, we.

5. A fescue was a big help. I used a bit of "Tinker Toy" run in the pencil sharpener. But a broom straw or a knitting needle or even a pencil would do. A finger is too broad. It points to the whole word, whereas the job of the fescue is to single out the code elements, letter-by-letter. I have seen children use the torn edge of a slip of paper to do this work, searching with a jagged tuft of the torn edge for the letter sequence.

How does it feel to begin to learn to read? Whether the Shavian alphabet has any other uses or not, the experience of being a beginner is available here for study.

We Need a Bigger Alphabet

Keyboards and typesetters have only 26 letters. Yet English phonics needs more than 40 symbols. This complicates our spelling problems.

In his book *On Language* George Bernard Shaw wrote: "It is useless to appeal to the education authorities. They dare not interfere with Dr. Johnson's monumental misspelling, which is now much more sacred than the creed and the catechism. I suggested to one eminent official educator that children in the elementary schools should be taught to spell phonetically as they speak. He replied that the barest hint of such a step would banish him from public life. I quite believe it."

Mr. Shaw examined various efforts at spelling reform, none of which have come about. In his will Mr. Shaw left funds for the development of a strictly phonic alphabet, specifying that it was not to use any of our present ABC's. The Shavian alphabet, produced in 1962, consisted of hooks and slants rather like shorthand. No one can read it "at sight". It requires study and practice. When I read *Androcles*, using this Shavian alphabet, I heard myself speaking in a clearly British accent. It does follow the specifications that Mr. Shaw insisted upon: that every symbol represent one sound and one sound only. It is puzzling why Shaw insisted that his alphabet use nc letters already in our alphabet. The Pitman shorthand was already in existence and Shaw himself had been using it since his youth. But how can the Shavian alphabet work for us all?

One afternoon in 1947, three years before his death, Shaw invited Sir James Pitman, grandson to the inventor of Pitman shorthand, to come to tea. Sir James arrived hoping to persuade Shaw to support spelling reform. Sir James listened to Shaw that afternoon, went home with a fresh idea, and the Initial Teaching Alphabet was born.

Then came the i/t/a.

By 1961 British schools were trying out a new alphabet developed by Sir James Pitman. This is called the Initial Teaching Alphabet, or i/t/a, or Augmented Roman. Using our everyday Roman alphabet, Sir James added other "letters" to accommodate the language we actually speak. Yet these "new" letters are not all that new, for he made them by soldering together our old friends. There are 19 of these ligatures, and they are instantly recognizable, without a code card.

One day in a bookstore I was looking for children's books printed in i/t/a. The young clerk who found one for me shoved it at me with a disgusted gesture: "It's all Greek to me!" she growled. I opened to the first page and asked her to take a look and read it aloud to me. She was a fair-minded soul, and she did-- and discovered that when she really **Looked** she could read the text with only slight hesitations.

In 1962 a friend of mine, who had gone gray teaching first grade, tried the i/t/a for one year, and she reported: "For the first time in my experience, Every Child in first grade learned to read before the end of the year." The next year her supervisor required her to change to a different method. Other first grade teachers had similar experience.

Citizens elsewhere in the world are finding English spelling their biggest barrier to writing English as a world language. At one time IBM Selectric did offer an i/t/a interchangeable typeball for its typewriter. Could other nationals write to us in i/t/a? We could read it offhand,--with no need to scoff at their misspellings. It would not be necessary to discard any libraries for this. It could be merely an occasional accommodation to make up for our complicated spelling patterns.

One more note about i/t/a. The most difficult remedial reading cases to tutor are the older ones. They bring with them a huge burden of bad habits of haste, of guessing at words, of making assumptions about what the text probably says. Such a student, confronted with a page in i/t/a, is stumped. His whole-word-recognition and guessing habits are useless. He actually has to inspect the text. Many a time such a student at my table has looked up from the page of i/t/a and sighed: "I wish everything was written like this."

Well, no. The i/t/a was never intended to replace our old Roman alphabet. Our libraries are full of books we want to read. The very name is the signal: i/t/a for Initial Teaching alphabet. No more than a beginner's start-up. A way to discover how talking can be turned into reading and writing. For the school children, the switch from i/t/a is accomplished with a transition book. Some children simply pick up on standard print without noticing the difference, once they have learned how an alphabet works. From there on the children are not limited to any controlled vocabulary books. They simply "sound it out" with a chuckle over the exceptions. It takes a bit of flexibility to read English anyway.

There are 44 sounds in English. The i/t/a offers the beginner a way to get acquainted with all 44, on the way to learning how to read with 26 letters.

Perhaps we should take another look at the i/t/a to help the beginners get a good start at understanding how an alphabet works?

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Short List

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Elaine Albert
Emerita, English, Western Michigan University
Tutor in reading since 1960
Author: How the Alphabet Works, 1990 [ERIC #ED 324 661]
Commissurotomy of the Corpus Callosum and the Remedial Reader, [ERIC #ED 325 816]
Reading with Hornbook and Fescue, 1974, 1986.

bob stωd bie ṁe pond, lωkiŋ for a plæs tω fiʃh.

"lωk at aull ṁœs bubblz!" hɛɛ sed. "whot a big fiʃh must bɛɛ out ṁær!"

bob waukt out on a log. hɛɛ ϸrωω his lien out tω ṁe bubblz.

This is a sample of i/t/a. For users of Latin, the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet were enough. English speech uses 44 sounds or "phonemes": Augmented Roman called the Initial Teaching Alphabet or i/t/a.

The i/t/a uses adaptations of the familiar alphabet letters. The reader who can read in our familiar alphabet and who sees i/t/a for the first time can figure out what it says without any instruction. Try it for yourself!

The i/t/a is not intended to replace ordinary book print. It has two uses: 1. To teach a beginner how the alphabet works without having to deal with "exceptions" just at first; and 2. To help an older "remedial reader" to stop guessing and really look at the text.

First grade teachers who have used i/t/a have found that children, once they have learned with i/t/a, shift easily into standard book print, often as early as spring of first grade. By second grade these children are not limited to special "easy reading" books but can choose from the library what they want to read.

In our search for improvement in literacy, i/t/a may be worth a second look?